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1972

ARCHIVES ①

The Village Of Bel-Nor

A History Of Non-Change  
by

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History 5

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# 1: Why Bel-nor?

In the spring of 1964, our family moved into a big old Dutch Colonial house in a village called Bel-Nor. Our view of the neighborhood included walks to an ageing school, through tree-lined streets, and past old, well-kept, homes, riding our bikes around the neighborhood, playing with friends, and amusing ourselves as most third-graders do, in the surroundings of our old-appearing village. Approximately ten years later, we are bigger, the house is smaller, the school has a new wing, the extension college across the street has grown to a full-scale university, and Bel-Nor has, some people think, entered into a decline.

The fact that the area was going downhill seemed well-accepted by everybody in town. Neighboring Welston was already a blighted area, some sections of the area had a "tough" reputation, and the well publicized and highly exaggerated "riots" at Normandy Senior High School served notice to all that the entire area was quickly decaying. Even we were fooled, as cries of "there goes the neighborhood" filled the air, and village trustees passed ordinances against block-busting and for-sale signs, and calling for occupancy permits for all new residents.

Still, the village didn't change over-night; in fact, it seems to be holding it's own for a blighted neighborhood. The property values have not gone through the floor, the families are still stable, middle-class families of average age and numbers, and the houses are still very well kept.

2

From this questions arise, such as; where did these rumors come from, why were they started and spread, and why were they so readily accepted? From all indications of the reasearch for this paper, the people who live here don't believe it any more,. So Why is it that the general public outside of Bel-Nor has so readily taken to this image of Bel-nor as on the down-hill road? One popular way to look at an area is through property values, they usually indicate the condition and quality of the neighborhood. But property values have remained high in Bel-Nor; why, then,, does it have a image of going down? One way to find out would be to look at the area from the veiwpoint of the man who sets the property values: a real estate agent. What does he have to say about Bel-Nor?

A widely accepted rule of thumb sets the life span of a neighborhood at thirty years. This helps the agent set values, predict the future, and most important, decide who is and who isn't a prospective customer for an area. Asked to go further, the agent sys, "An area like Bel-Nor will usually take a few years to be born, then will live about thirty years, and then will undergo a change of life." How would you describe this municipal menopause, we ask? The neighborhood dies, says the agent,. It simply dies.

That's where the image comes from, we thought! We'll right a paper about Bel-Nor that says Bel-Nor was born and lived thirty years, and that now it is dead. But then, we couldn't find proof

that it was dead. Why Not, We asked? It always looked old to us. Its all residential like an old neighborhood, and it was incorporated in 1937, so why isn't it dead yet?

Then we looked closely at the data and re-evaluated the agents rule of thumb, and found the mistaken conclusion that everyone had been jumping too. It was hidden in that phrase, "take a few years to be born." It has taken a few years to be born for Bel-Nor. I would say it has taken about thirty years for it to do that alone. IN the span from 1923 when the greatest part of the land was assembled for the purpose of land development to 1945 or sometime around then, after the war was over, when the greatest part of the building took place, covers about a thirty year span. If you count a village as born when all the housing is complete, the Bel-Nor was not complete until around 1958 or maybe a little later..

4

## 2: Early times in the county

What today constitutes the Village of Bel-Nor is not by any means a new developement. It is old in places, but the fact remains that it is much younger than believed in others. The Village hall has in its possession two old maps showing the dates on which two large tracts, known as Country Club Park additions numbers 1 and 2. These were assembled by unknown parties to be developed into a residential housing development known as Bel-Nor, the date on the map showing the final transaction as taking place in 1923. This area was bounded by Natural Bridge Rd. on the north, A row of plots facing Carson Road on the west (this small parcel of land is not in B.-N., and separates it from Carson Rd.), the Normandy Golf Club on the south, and an area owned by the Catholic Church on the east ( the grounds of the Marillac College, and other institutions). Some time was spent in planning of the developement, as it was only partly developed in the year 1929, after opening in 1927. Some of the structures ~~are~~ are older than the incorporation date, mainly in the Addition #1 section (see maps). Still, This is very close to the Great Crash, and the Depression, so it is understandable that most of the construction did not take place at this time.

Bel-Nor was a well thought out little suburb, designed to afford privacy and comfort. At this date it was classed as improved property--meaning that you bought a lot with a sidewalk and street frontage, and built your own home. An example of the care in planning is the allotment of land in each block

for walkways between streets. This was done so that The school would be in easy reach of anyone living in the area. That it had a school was also a feature, caused by a lucky set of circumstances. Normandy School District divided itself into three wards at this time, and the lines left ward one with no school inside its boundaries. The Bel-Nor developers donated seven plots of land for the school,,if it was named the Bel-Nor School. So it happened that the Normandy District received its first fireproof school building, and Bel-Nor residents could read from the adds that Bel-Nor had It's Own School( that Carsonville students used it also was beside the point, it was still Their School)..

So it seems that as the Depression struck, Bel-Nor Was just gaining a foothold. It wasn't sent reeling by the blow, but just took a nap for the duration. Our sources inform us that little changed because of it,.Some people were forced to sell their homes , but for the most part cuts in living standards were unnoticable, let alone loss of job or income.

Many who lived in Bel-Nor were either professional or owned their source of income, and were not touched very hard by the catastrophe.

The people who moved in were either up-and-coming young families or older men with growing families, there were very few young married couples, and most people had children. One trait was verified by all sources; the resident came here to buy his home. This was to be the last move for him and his family.

6

For this reason, it was almost from the beginning a "settled" neighborhood, and crisis was expected to be rare. It was a pleasant suburb away from the noisy, bustling city. It was convenient to two of the county's largest thoroughfares, Natural Bridge Road and St. Charles Rock Road. The Welston shopping district was nearby to supply all needs. It was pleasant, quiet living. (Arlmont Drive was not yet through to Normandy Dr. at this time, but residents found it was easy to cut between the two over the short, unpaved section, and still protect their privacy with Street Not Through signs.)

Construction did not come to a halt at this time and continued slow expansion caused a need for a new Village government. The developer had, up to this time, been the village trustee, and had provided things of public need such as a 24 - hour-a-day patrolling constable. It had also provided Septic tank sewage treatment for the homes, all draining down into the ponds on the Golf clubs course. Expansion soon caused the ponds to be inadequate for the load, and so, when the ponds, downwind of just about anywhere on the course at one time or another, became not nice to be near, The club threatend to sue. When notified that they and not the government were responsible, the residents <sup>resented</sup> ~~for~~ a government that they were responsible for also.

The new Board of Trustees, headed by Mr Leo B. Painter, Met in November of 1937 and voted in seventeen ordinances, taking the name Bel-Nor for their village, and defining their bounds, government, and laws. Next April, 1938, they met and Bought land from the golf club <sup>and Lake Charles Bunk</sup> ~~to~~ install a sewer line to a sewage disposal station they were to construct near st. Charles Rock Road.

This also led to problems , but in this case they were far easier solved, being corrected buy Bel-Nor's only fling with expansionism. Welston Indicated they would start annexation of property on St. Charles to the west. On her<sup>a</sup>ring of this Bel-Nor rushed to annex the golf course , the cemetary, little Belleview Park in between Bel-Nor and these areas, and in the proses, their sewer system, to avo<sup>i</sup>id the squabbles that would have resulted. This brought up zoning problems, and BuildingsOrdinance squabbles as Bel-Nor only allowed two-story Brick, and these were all single-story frame. The ordinace was ammended to allow single-story homes in this area, but all new homes were to be of all brick construction.

About this time World War II had begun, and this, as all before, caused little comotion. Many of the men went, called by the Normandy area Draft Board, while the women stayed home, and either held jobs, or did work at the school, such as darning socks and sewing. Rationing had little effect on their lives. It was wars end and the prosperity that followed that caused the biggest boom in building the area ever had. From about 1949 on, the building continued, with many of the houses going in and streets going through, including a hard fought Normandy Drive connection. This was probably the biggest mistake ever made here, as the triffic this small street carries is incrèdible, and has been a source of complaint ever since.

Up untill now, things have continued pretty much the same. Construction of new homes was completed about 1960 except for one or two new homes since then. Nobody Knows when the first



8

blacks moved into Bel-Nor, as nobody seemed to notice or care. when the first family of blacks did. There are a few black families in the village but the status of the community was not affected by their presence as they seemed to fit the standard upper-middle class mold. The only big change of the past few years is that the new families in Bel-Nor are now somewhat older in that they have either more children or children in higher grades of school, and are more established in their positions and lifestyles. An example of this is that of ten randomly selected occupancy permits issued in the last year; there was a doctor, several professional and business men, and approximately half of the total were employed at the University of Missouri, St. Louis.

The closest to a squabble in Bel-Nor recently has been a new ordinance on sidewalk care and maintenance, which has occupied the first spot on agendas for town meetings for the last six months. There have also been attempts to slow traffic flow on Normandy Drive, through the use of barricades (all of which were destroyed in a matter of weeks by vandals) and through the use at present of stop signs.

9

The question that arises from all of this is: how did a community as stable as Bel-Nor receive a reputation as a decaying neighborhood?

Among the things that are not responsible for these rumors is a decline in property values. Bel-Nor property values have been increasing slowly but steadily over the past years. According to one source all of the houses built early in Bel-Nor's history were priced at approximately \$17,000. Today these houses are worth approximately \$20,000 or more. Construction in Bel-Nor has raised property values on the average. The most recent house built was in 1965 and was priced at \$25,000, while most of the houses built between 1950 and 1970 have been priced between \$20,000 and \$25,000.

These rumors could be blamed on the fact that the town council passed what have been referred to as "scare laws" in the form of occupancy and building inspection ordinances; as have other communities in the surrounding areas. Among these ordinances are also laws calling for the care and maintenance of trees and sidewalks, and motions to seek the closing of Normandy Drive, as Hanley is closed at Delmar.

These laws were passed to alleviate any fears of decay. So far, they have worked very well.

The change that has come over the Normandy School District has had something to do with the fears of decay. This is due,

to the fact that some parts of the Normandy School District are suffering from blight and decay and have been for quite some time. This fact and the memories of the ridiculously over-blown reports of "riots" at Normandy High School have much to do with rumored decay throughout the Normandy School District, of which Bel-Nor is a part.

This leaves the widely accepted rule-of-thumb of a thirty-year community life-span as the only cause left undiscussed. Bel-Nor has by no means stagnated in this area in past years. There are houses for sale in Bel-Nor much of the time. However, it is evident that Bel-Nor offers a far slower rate of turnover than many of the surrounding communities. It is, as we have pointed out, a place people want to consider "home". This is possibly the reason that Bel-Nor has been termed a decaying neighborhood. In the eyes of the people who make these decisions <sup>(ie. Real Estate Salesmen)</sup> Bel-Nor has been dead for quite some time.

It is doubtful that the proph<sup>ph</sup>esy of death will come true for quite some time, if ever. It will only start when the people of Bel-Nor are finally convinced of Bel-Nor's imminent demise.

This is the only conclusion that can be made in the light of the evidence we have collected. However, its validity is also questionable. Bel-Nor might be a fluke; given the gift of long life because of a deprived infancy. If circumstances

11

had allowed Bel-Nor to complete its growth in what is now considered normal for a neighborhood of its size, Bel-Nor might also be nearing its last days. This is in comparison to an area such as the present Pruitt-Igoe complex, which, though not a perfect analogy, will suffice as an example of the construction process used in the present time.

If Bel-Nor had been planned and constructed in haste as many present day sub-divisions are it might be in the process of reconstruction and demolition.

And this is only one example of the questioning process when applied to the validity of Bel-Nor as an example of a normal neighborhood. Other factors that could be raised the cost of the houses, the entrance of the University into the area, and the classes of people that inhabit Bel-Nor.

However, until <sup>further</sup> evidence on these areas is collected we must stand by the conclusion that the thirty-year life span is invalid, and that Bel-Nor is far from dead; it is just starting to live.

Very Well Done!  
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Remember our conversation about  
the real estate dealer's stake in  
new construction + high turnover.  
see page 10 for ~~extra~~ brochures referring to this

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

In discussing the validity of our sources we wish to pause first and give credit to the following people:

89 Mrs. John G. (Virginia) Whiteley; Deputy Clerk of the Village of Bel-Nor. Mrs. Whiteley was a great help to us in finding and understanding the information on which this paper is based.

Mrs. Catherine Fenaja; daughter of Leo B. Painter, first chairman of the board of trustees of Bel-Nor. Mrs. Fenaja moved here in 1929, and her memory of details aided us in formulating our thesis.

Dr. Ward E. Barnes, Ex-superintendent of schools, Normandy School District, now Professor of Education, University of Missouri, St. Louis. We thank Dr. Barnes for his personal insights into the area of Normandy, and for allowing the use of his Volume of The Story Of Normandy.

Mr. Russel Doyle Ex-principal of Bel-Nor Elementary School, presently a member of the Normandy School District Administration. We thank Mr. Doyle for his co-operation in obtaining for us information on the school in Bel-Nor, and for his personal insights into the area as head of its school.

In addition to the help of these people, we also used the listed volumes found on the following page;

13

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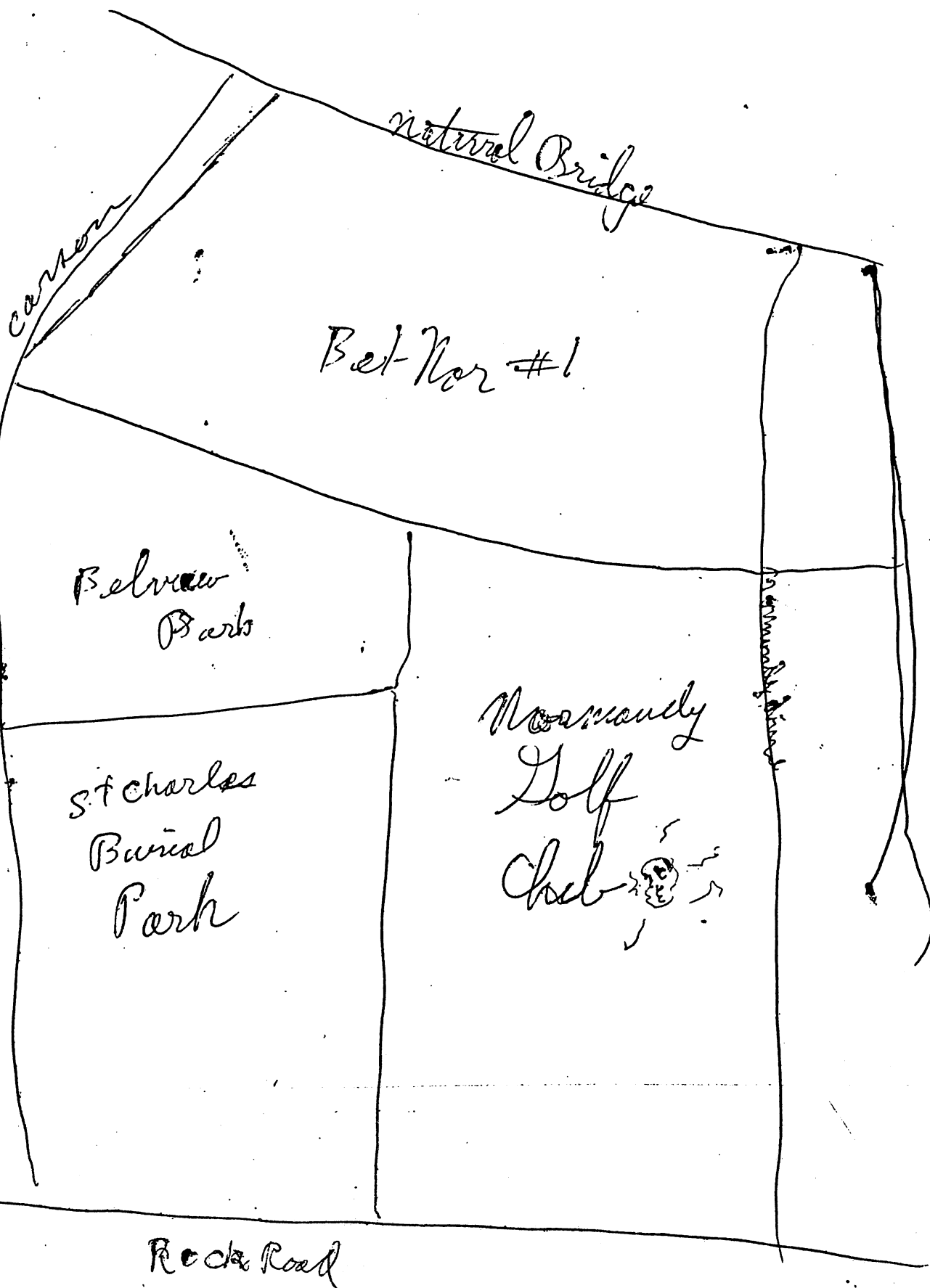
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(the above two are in a single volume owned by Dr. Barnes)

History of the Normandy Area--Pamphlet on file at the

St. Louis County Library, Natrual Bridge Branch

The information in the above volumes is documented as factual. In the case of the personal recollections given by the above, we feel that they are accurate as they were born out in our own findings; and they <sup>in that</sup> corroborate each other's recollections.



Natural Bridge

Belvoir Park

St Charles  
Bunal  
Park

Normandy  
Golf  
Club

Normandy Blvd

Rock Road

corner

Mr. Nelson:

We are sorry that we didn't get this in during class but we were given the chance to get a copy of the paper so it would go on file at Bet-Nor town Hall. Boy Scouts use them for citizenship merit badges according to Mrs. Whitley. Also we got the maps in the back copies for you.

Thank you for trouble  
Art L. Brown